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# Restaurant Marquees: A Help or Hindrance'?

## **Abstract**

The marquee is one of the most common and cost-effective forms of advertising, but it can be a restaurant's worst enemy. Here are some surprising facts about its use and misuse.

## **Keywords**

John R. Dienhart, Michael M. Lefever, Restaurant Marquees: A Help or Hindrance, Outdoor Plants, Poster Panel, Painted Bulletin, Gross Rating Points (GRP's), Spectacular Sign, Advertising

# Restaurant Marquees: A Help or Hindrance?

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*The marquee is one of the most common and cost-effective forms of advertising, but it can be a restaurant's worst enemy. Here are some surprising facts about its use and misuse.*

"Many of the managers I interviewed seemed shocked when I asked them questions concerning how they used their marquees," declared Gilbert Straub, a senior in Restaurant, Hotel and Institutional Management at Purdue University. Gilbert, along with 11 other seniors, conducted a study investigating the use of restaurant marquees. Jim Honan, another student investigator, said, "I discovered the research on the marquee was a surprise to many of the managers. They had no idea anyone would ask so many questions about marquees. I felt quite a few of the managers learned something from our questions. Consequently, they plan to devote more attention toward their marquee advertising."

Marquee advertising is the use of signage either directly attached to a restaurant structure or freestanding on the property. It is also characterized by changeable panels, letters, and numbers for advertising trademarks and composing short messages. Marquees are a form of billboard advertising that has the oldest trade association in the advertising industry. The Associated Bill Posters was formed in 1891 to establish standards and adopt uniform practices. It is known today as the Outdoor Advertising Association of America. The association has established standardized types and sizes of outdoor structures and standard trade procedures so that a national advertiser can plan an outdoor campaign for markets across the country.

Billboard advertising provides the largest and most colorful display for a restaurant's trademark, product, or slogan. It offers the most spectacular use of illumination to attract attention and has shown special effectiveness in getting a name known.

Since cars pass outdoor signs quickly, copy is limited to a message that can be told in a few words. Creating a design that can tell its story in pictures is the greatest challenge for billboard advertisers. Not all messages are suited to such compression.

The basic business unit of the billboard industry is the local outdoor sign company or "outdoor plant." Its stock in trade is the location it has leased or bought under local zoning regulations permitting the erection of signs. Having acquired a location, the plant operator builds a structure at his own expense, sells the advertising space on it (technically he leases the space), posts or paints the advertiser's message, and is responsible for maintaining the board and the ad in good condition during the life of the advertiser's contract.

The two forms of standardized outdoor advertising handled by outdoor plants are the poster panel and the painted bulletin.

Posters are structures that have blank panels on which preprinted advertisements can be gummed. Posters can be illuminated or unilluminated. A standard size poster panel is 12 by 25 feet. It has a standard construction and frame. A distinguishing feature of poster panels is the ease and simplicity of replacing the message. They are a low-cost method of buying outdoor advertising and are widely used.

Posters are now sold in Gross Rating Points (GRPs). A rating point is equivalent to the exposure of an ad to 1 percent of the population of a market per day. A 100 GRP package consists of the number of poster panels required to deliver exposure opportunities to 100 percent of the population of the market in one day; a 50 GRP offers exposure opportunities to 50 percent of the population of a market. A 100 GRP showing in one city may include fewer posters than in another larger city, but it will provide the same market penetration.

When the time comes actually to purchase posters, the outdoor space buyer rides through the area with a plant operator or his representative, who has a map spotting the prepared sites included in a package. Posters are sold on a monthly basis, and copy can be changed monthly.

The sale of space in the billboard advertising industry is based on a count of the automobile traffic passing a sign every day. The traffic count ignores duplication (people who pass a sign twice a day) and provides a yardstick for comparing values of different locations. The central source of all such information is the "Traffic Audit Bureau," a tripartite organization formed years ago by the advertisers, agencies, and plant owners who constitute its membership.

"Painted bulletins" are permanent structures, larger (usually 14 by 48 feet) and costlier than posters. Erected at choice locations, these structures are made of prefabricated steel with a standardized or specially constructed border trim. The advertisements are either hand-painted or mounted on separate panels in the shop and then assembled at the bulletin site.

Painted bulletins are bought individually, unlike posters which are bought by GRP units. Contracts run for a year or more, especially if the bulletins require special construction. The advertiser or a representative visits a territory to inspect each location offered by the local plant operator, who supplies a traffic flow map of the locations. The advertiser

judges the ad's circulation, the distance from which it is visible, the amount of traffic, competing signs and distractions, and any special features affecting its visibility. If shortcomings are found, the price quoted for the individual painted bulletin may be subject to negotiation. About three times a year, the advertiser can change the copy and supply the design and art work to the plant operator who is responsible for reproducing it and maintaining the sign in good condition.

A third form of outdoor advertising not generally handled by outdoor plants is the "spectacular" sign. This is not a standardized billboard; it is made by specialists in steel construction. Spectaculars are the most conspicuous and the costliest in terms of cash outlay (but low cost per person reached) of all billboard advertisements. Placed in prime day-and-night locations and designed to attract the greatest number of passers-by, they are built of steel beams, sheet metal, and plastics. Because of the high cost of construction, spectaculars are usually bought on a three to five-year basis. It takes an experienced and skilled buyer to handle negotiations on engineering and legal problems as well as the usual advertising considerations.

What distinguishes marquees from other forms of outdoor advertising is greater flexibility. The message on a marquee can be easily and inexpensively changed as often as necessary with the use of removable panels, letters, and numbers. It is far less expensive, in the long run, than poster panels, painted bulletins, or spectaculars. But its effectiveness is virtually limited to the local market.

### **Survey Reviews Marquees**

Senior students in the Department of Restaurant, Hotel and Institutional Management at Purdue University developed a survey instrument, gathered information, and tabulated results to look at how marquees are used.

A trial instrument was tested by teams of students who administered verbal and written questions to 10 restaurant managers who had marquees on or adjacent to their restaurants. The final instrument is shown in Figure 1.

Ninety-one restaurant managers participated in the study, 54 chain operators and 37 independents. Those surveyed had been using marquees for an average of six years. Figure 2 presents a demographic distribution of the participants.

### **Most Own Their Marquees**

Eighty-one percent of the marquees were owned, while 19 percent of the participants leased mobile units. The cost of leasing a marquee ranged from \$1.79 to \$9.33 per day depending on location and size. A deposit was usually required and there was an added cost for every letter lost. The major drawback of a leased marquee was its "temporary appearance" according to a majority (78 percent) of the participants.

Participants were asked if they used their marquees as a tool to recruit employees. Sixty-five percent of the chain operators advertised "Help Wanted," while only 43 percent of the independents followed suit. This could reflect the general high rate of turnover in restaurants but in varying degrees depending on chain versus independent manage-

**Figure 1**  
**How Is The Marquee Used By Restaurants?**

(Uses of an outside sign on the premises for promotions)

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**Restaurant:** \_\_\_\_\_ **City:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Independent ( )**                      **Multi-Unit ( )**

1. How long have you used a marquee?     (     ) years
2. Do you own or rent the marquee?     (     ) own (     ) rent
3. Do you list general information?     (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Hours of operation                      (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Closed or open                         (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Temporary inconveniences             (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Help wanted                              (     ) yes (     ) no
    - For employees positions                (     ) yes (     ) no
    - For management positions             (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Jingles                                  (     ) yes (     ) no
4. Do you offer congratulations?     (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Happy Birthday                         (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Happy Anniversary                      (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Employee of the Month                 (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Welcome                                 (     ) yes (     ) no
5. Do you promote community events?    (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Support school functions               (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Seasonal holidays                        (     ) yes (     ) no
6. Do you promote special menus  
and services?                              (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Discount specials                       (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Seasonal specials                        (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Introduction of new menu items        (     ) yes (     ) no
  - New service techniques                (     ) yes (     ) no
7. Do you promote the "best" of your  
restaurant?                                (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Specialty menu items                    (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Specialty service techniques          (     ) yes (     ) no
  - A unique atmosphere                    (     ) yes (     ) no
8. Do you measure the effectiveness?  
How effective? (low: 1, high: 5)        (1   2   3   4   5)
9. If the answer to #8 is "Yes" then how?
  - Ask customers for responses            (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Ask employees for responses            (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Monitors changes in sales              (     ) yes (     ) no
  - Just a gut feeling                        (     ) yes (     ) no
10. How often do you change the  
information on the marquee?  
(     ) Daily (     ) Weekly (     ) Monthly (     ) Other \_\_\_\_\_
11. Do you tie the marquee to other  
advertisement?                            (     ) yes (     ) no

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**Figure 2**  
**Demographic Distribution**

	Multi-Unit	%	Independent	%	Total	%
Indiana	39	73.58	22	57.89	61	67.03
Arkansas	3	5.66	4	10.53	7	7.69
Kentucky	1	1.89	4	10.53	5	5.49
Ohio	1	1.89	0	0.00	1	1.10
Michigan	1	1.89	1	2.63	2	2.20
New Jersey	2	3.77	3	7.89	5	5.49
New York	4	7.55	1	2.63	5	5.49
W. Virginia	1	1.89	1	2.63	2	2.20
Florida	0	0.00	1	2.63	1	1.10
Connecticut	1	1.89	1	2.63	2	2.20
Total	53	100.00	38	100.00	91	100.00
Overall Totals		58.24		41.76		

ment attitudes on employee retention.

The study uncovered a particularly interesting point relative to "Help Wanted" advertising. Several chain operators indicated they were successful in recruiting new employees by displaying "Help Wanted" on their marquees. Interestingly enough, they received almost immediate responses with this form of advertising. In this case, the marquee was used as a positive recruitment tool. On the other hand, several other chain operators were convinced that "Help Wanted" conveyed a negative image to the general public. In their opinion a marquee advertising "Help Wanted" informed the public of a service problem. It seems likely that a marquee can attract prospective employees and discourage customers at the same time.

One student said, "Most of the restaurants I surveyed didn't give any recognition to their employees through the use of their marquees. In an industry where entry-level pay is often low and the turnover rate high, I think placing employee names on the marquee for a job well done is a wonderful way to tell employees that management appreciates them. Anyway, it costs almost nothing. It may even project a positive image to the public because time has been taken to care for employees who care for customers."

Results indicated that only 5 percent of independents and 29 percent of chain operators offered congratulations to employees for a job well done. The marquee might be used as a retention device rather than a handy tool to recruit a continual stream of new and untrained employees.

#### **Uniqueness of Restaurant Should Be Exhibited**

The marquee is often the beginning of a rapport with the customer.

It should be an accurate reflection of management's character and should suggest quality, thought, and concern. People will "buy" what a restaurant is selling if they "buy" what the restaurant marquee is saying. The marquee can express the character and mood of a restaurant with just a few words. It should describe how the potential customer can benefit from the restaurant.

The participants were asked if their marquees promoted the "unique" aspects of their restaurants; 83 percent of the chain operators and 76 percent of the independent operators said "yes." One independent owner located near a duck hunting area was truly creative with his marquee. "Avoid the Rush and Eat Early! Have Breakfast with a Duck Pro." In reality, every customer in the restaurant turned out to be a "Duck Pro."

Another independent operator displayed uniqueness by encouraging her customers to associate menu specials with the day of the week: What Day Is It. . . ?/It's Baked Chicken Day!/Join Us For Lunch And For Dinner. This restaurant featured a special entree based on the day of the week (Wednesday, Swiss Steak Day; Thursday, Baked Chicken Day; Friday, Baked Halibut Day). The marquee was used to promote the "unique" aspects on a daily and recurring basis. The marquee is the starting point for selling a good time and a "people" experience.

The participants were asked if they measured the effectiveness of the marquee as a marketing tool; 51 percent of the chain operators and 22 percent of the independent operators responded that they did make an "effort" to monitor effectiveness. The monitoring was somewhat systematic, but mostly intuitive. For instance, chain operators measured effectiveness by monitoring changes in sales (44 percent), random questioning of customers (33 percent), and querying employees (29 percent).

On the other hand, independents asked customers for responses (26 percent), noted changes in sales (22 percent), and polled employees (14 percent). This demonstrates a classic difference in priorities between chain managers and independents. Chain operators often focus on sales, whereas independents prefer to focus on the customers. The comparatively high rate of employee querying by chain operators might be explained by the tendency of independents who already "know" what their employees are thinking.

Another student who interviewed many of the participants said, "In general, the operators surveyed used the marquee just because it was there. They basically used it because they had the sign and enough letters left to construct a message. Most didn't realize the opportunities for its effective use."

### **Changes in Scripts Are Critical**

Forty-eight percent of the participants changed the script or message on the marquee weekly, while 15 percent changed the script daily. The remaining participants varied between weekly and monthly changes. This can be compared to poster changes that occur about every month and painted bulletins that change every four to six months.

It seems that many operators view script changing as a nuisance and maintain the same message as long as possible. One chain operator complained that frequent changing resulted in damaged or lost letters



which eventually led to shorter messages. It was possibly a blessing in disguise since shorter messages are generally more effective. Messages should take no longer than eight seconds to read out loud.

The *Wall Street Journal*<sup>1</sup> recently reported a new study conducted by the Eno Foundation for Transportation which revealed that 12.7 million people commute from a suburb to a central city each day, while almost twice that number—25 million—commute from one suburb to another. In areas where the central city has a population of 250,000 or fewer, most commuters still travel from the suburbs to the center of town. This strongly suggests that marquees should be directed at the flow of commuters or heaviest flow of traffic depending on the time of day. Consideration should be given to the possibility of changing the script more than once a day depending on the needs of the commuters. This is easily done with computerized marquees.

It is obvious when a restaurant manager considers the marquee a nuisance. Worst of all, a neglected or mediocre marquee is a fairly accurate indicator that the food and service are equally neglected and mediocre.

Marketing with a marquee is part of a total concept involving attitudes, menus, services, and special promotions of a restaurant. A greater awareness of the powerful influence, both positive and negative, of the marquee as part of a restaurant's marketing plan needs to be developed. The should be used to initiate and maintain a lasting relationship with individual customers or market segments. Marquees can also tie in with other forms of outdoor advertising.

#### References

<sup>1</sup> "American Demographics People Patterns," *Wall Street Journal*, (December 18, 1987), p. 25.